

# Censorship and complicity at the Venice Biennale

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The British artist Jeremy Deller has withdrawn a banner and posters featuring the words “Prince Harry Kills Me” from this year’s British pavilion at the Venice Biennale. He did so following a request from the British Council, an organisation partly funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Deller’s British pavilion show is entitled “English Magic.” His work generally has shown some instinctive reaction against class oppression, inequality and war. Previous projects have included a re-enactment of the Battle of Orgreave, a key moment in the 1984-1985 miners’ strike, and a road trip across America in a car damaged by a roadside bomb in Iraq seeking to elicit discussions about the war. His engagement with working class culture has sometimes been whimsical (an industrial brass band playing acid house tunes), but there is something interesting at work here.

In one mural by Stuart Sam Hughes, a giant William Morris hurls the yacht of Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich into the Venice lagoon. In another, Deller probes corporate tax avoidance: the burning streets are an imagined protest against rich Britain’s offshore tax arrangements in the Channel Islands. Deller has said, “I wanted to include a picture of St. Helier...British taxpayers have gone to Jersey to demonstrate against their tax avoidance culture and basically the city of St. Helier gets burned to the ground. It is like a medieval sacking.”

Elsewhere, there are portraits of former Labour Party prime minister Tony Blair, his advisor Alastair Campbell and Dr. David Kelly, the whistleblower many believe was killed for revealing evidence of how the Labour government and the security services concocted the case for war against Iraq.

The portraits were drawn by former soldiers who have found themselves in prison after tours of duty in

Iraq and Afghanistan.

These works seek to address critical issues confronting working people in Britain, as elsewhere, but the treatment is eclectic. The soundtrack includes a Caribbean steel drum band playing David Bowie and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Neolithic hand axes are juxtaposed with William Morris fabrics and privatisation vouchers issued in Russia in the early 1990s. Deller is clearly concerned at privatisation and corporate rapaciousness, but against this he seems to be appealing to a tradition of national reformism.

This inevitably places constraints on Deller’s expression of anger.

Greeting the visitor to the British pavilion is another mural, by Sarah Tynan, of a Hen Harrier crushing a Range Rover car.

In 2007, two of the protected birds of prey were shot on the royal estate at Sandringham. The only two people shooting on the estate that day were Prince Harry and a friend. The shooting of protected species carries a prison sentence, but the police halted any inquiries. Deller has said the incident speaks of “getting away with it,” and that he “absolutely” implicates the prince in the incident.

“That really annoyed me,” he told press, “so I thought I would do something with a giant hen harrier taking revenge on man, not Prince Harry necessarily, but man in general. It’s called *A Good Day for Cyclists* because I am a cyclist in London, and as every cyclist knows, Range Rover drivers are the worst drivers by far, along with Porsche drivers. They are beyond the pale.”

Deller’s response to the specific incident becomes here a more unstated and instinctive highlighting of privilege and inequality. Neither Range Rovers nor Porsches come cheap. However, Deller’s expression of

opposition is remarkably coy.

He had originally planned that a banner and poster, carrying the slogan “Prince Harry kills me,” would link the different sections of the show. These are the works that Deller was asked, and agreed, to withdraw. Deller has argued that at one level the slogan could be read as simply meaning that Prince Harry is funny. “Depending on your position on the monarchy you could take it as Prince Harry is all right, or not” he told the *Guardian*. “People who love Prince Harry will probably love it.”

This is a somewhat pathetic and certainly unconvincing defence of work that clearly was not animated by a love of the prince. The slogan is connected to the Hen Harrier incident, but it also recalls an interview given by the prince in January. Discussing his military service in Afghanistan as a helicopter pilot, Harry told journalists, “If there’s people trying to do bad stuff to our guys, then we’ll take them out of the game, I suppose. Take a life to save a life...the squadron’s been out here. Everyone’s fired a certain amount.”

The British Council asked Deller to “reconsider” the banner and poster “on the grounds that it could potentially be misconstrued in environments where the British army is currently deployed and perceived to be disrespectful of those who had lost their lives.”

It argued that the “obvious risk was that in less secure environments, where British troops and indeed the British Council are on the ground—most notably in Afghanistan, where Prince Harry has served—these works could have been used to justify violence or attacks.”

British Council offices in Kabul were the target of a suicide bomber in 2011, in an attack that killed 12.

This is a demand for art to be subservient to military engagement. Artistic expression conflicts with, and is outranked by, imperialist conflict. The violence that has devastated Afghan society is a direct and inevitable consequence of the US-led invasion and imperialist plunder. The British Council’s argument exonerates the occupying forces.

Their argument places the royal family and the military beyond artistic criticism, however mild. In response, Deller agreed to withdraw the poster and banner, leaving them in his London studio.

“They are under a very different pressure [to] me,” he said. “I’m actually quite happy about [the removal].”

The British Council has insisted that there are no artistic implications to the removal, saying, “All parties felt that the exhibition maintains its integrity without these works.”

This is, of course, transparently untrue, and more so given that the supine reaction of Deller and the exhibition’s organisers handed victory to the censors.

The British Council’s request for the removal of these works points to the increased pressure being brought to bear on artists to conform, to stay silent. The agreement by Deller to withdraw his work is an error and a capitulation, when faced with nothing more serious than the threatened opprobrium of the ruling elite and its media. Much greater conviction and seriousness is required of artists in this period—and a greater degree of independence from the privileged hand that ultimately feeds the artistic establishment.



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